

“Faith Reckoned as Righteousness”

Genesis 12:1-4; 15:1-6; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

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Lent II

We get to enjoy some fabulously rich passages from the New Testament during this season of Lent. Beginning today, and continuing for the next several weeks, are some of the most important and profound passages in the gospel of John. It is with good reason that John has traditionally been called “the evangelist *and theologian*,” the only one of the four gospel writers to earn that title.

But as tempting as it is to talk about that beautiful conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, today I would like us to take a look at the equally profound passage from Paul’s magnificent letter to the Romans. For it is here that Paul explores the vital connection between *faith* and *righteousness*.

We need to begin in the Old Testament, with two pivotal stories from the book of Genesis about the patriarch Abraham, who enjoyed a very special and intimate relationship with God and is the first real “hero” in the Bible. In Genesis 11, we read about Abraham’s call, about how God told Abraham to leave his ancestral homeland in Mesopotamia to go to the land of Canaan. (Palestine, Israel, the Holy Land; that region has been known by various names.) There are multiple aspects of that story that are important, but for now, I simply want you to note one key point: the fact that God promised to bless “all the families of the earth” “in Abraham.” What that means will become clear later on.

Fast forward a few chapters; Abraham has now arrived in the land of Canaan, and he has a vision in which God speaks to him. At this point in the story Abraham has a problem; God has made many promises to Abraham about his descendants, but as of yet, Abraham does not have a child. He has appointed his servant, a man named Eliezar, to be his heir. Abraham is not very happy about that. But God says to Abraham: “This man” – Eliezar – “shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” Abraham will have his own *biological* child, who will inherit Abraham’s possessions and God’s promises. To prove the point, God brings Abraham outside and beckons him to look at the sky: “count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Abraham gazes up at the night sky – a sky that would have, at that point, before the advent of electric lights, displayed a far greater number of stars than what we customarily see. “So shall your descendants be,” says God: too innumerable to count.

The critical line here is in verse 6: “He believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Two things happen here. First, Abraham *believes* what God is telling him. He *trusts*

that God will make good on his word. He places his *faith* in God's promises. Those three words are closely linked: *belief, trust, faith*. *Faith* is an expression of *belief* and *trust*. Then, in response to Abraham's faith and trust, *God does something* that impacts Abraham *dramatically*. The NRSV puts it like this: "the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." That's a complicated phrase; what does it mean? It does *not* mean what the Common English Bible suggests it means. The CEB, the Bible we have in our pew racks, translates the line like this: "the Lord recognized Abram's high moral character." That translation is *completely* incorrect and misleading. The verse is *not* talking about Abraham's morality. It talks about his *faith*, and how God responded to that faith. Morality may grow out of faith, but morality and faith are two completely different things. This is a case when the translators really botched it!

So what *does* it mean? What *did* God do, when Abraham believed God? To answer that, we need to turn to the New Testament, to one of the passages that talk about this verse. This passage is not easy to understand; Paul uses some complex terms here, like "justification." Justification, in the biblical sense, is what happens when God looks at our lives, and declares us to be *righteous*, despite all our sins. God makes a declaration that we are *righteous* in his eyes – no matter *what* we have done. That's justification. It's like a verdict in a courtroom, when the jury finds the defendant *not guilty*. Even if they really *were* guilty of the crime, they have been declared to be *not guilty*, and they can never be put on trial for that same crime again. That's what God does with us, except the difference is that God knows the *truth* about our lives – *all* the truth, every single last little bit of it – and God *still* declares that we are "not guilty." Or, to be more precise, God declares that we are "righteous." Our lives may have been full of sin, but God says, "Those sins don't matter. I am not going to hold you responsible for them." That's *justification*, that declaration of righteousness that God makes, even when we don't deserve it. What's really happening here is that God is imparting to us the righteousness of *Jesus Christ*. Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, and in his sacrificial death on the cross he took upon himself all our sin and made atonement for it. That act wiped away all our sin. It's like God took the clean slate that was Jesus' life, and gave it to each and every single one of us, so that when God looks at us, what he sees is not all the wrong that we have done, but rather all the *right* that *Jesus* has done. We take on the *righteousness of Christ*. We are *justified* in that moment when God declares us to be righteous.

The question is, did we *do something* that *earned* us the declaration that we are righteous? That would be called "justification by works" – the notion that God declares us to be righteous because *we did something* that caused us to *earn* it. But what Paul argues is that we are *not* justified by our works. We do not *earn* God's declaration that we are righteous. We get it some other way. But ... how?

"What does the scripture say?" Paul asks. He quotes Genesis: "'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'" Remember what Abraham did: he looked up at the stars, and he *believed God*. In response, God "reckoned it to him as righteousness." It was a *gift* that God gave him; the gift of being seen as righteous in the eyes of God. Paul's point is that this was not something Abraham *earned*. It is not like *wages*. You work for your employer; you *earn* your wage; you receive a paycheck. That's not a gift. You get it because you *worked* for it. What Paul is saying is that righteousness is a *gift*. Abraham didn't *earn* it; he didn't believe in God's promises in order to receive payment. He simply *believed* ... and that belief motivated God to give Abraham a *gift*: the gift of righteousness. That's called *justification by faith*. It was a *gift* God gave, when Abraham believed.

Paul says: “To one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.” Those are very precise words, translated very literally from the Greek. What they mean is this: “When someone trusts God without any expectation of payment or a reward, God responds to that person’s faith the same way God responded to Abraham’s faith. God gives that person a *gift*, the precious gift of being viewed as *righteous* in God’s eyes, no matter what sins that person may have ever committed.” That’s my own summary of what Paul is trying to say.

He continues: “For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” My paraphrase: “Abraham did not receive God’s promises because he was keeping God’s commandments or obeying God’s laws. Abraham received God’s promises because he believed that God’s word was trustworthy and true.” What inspires God to give the gift of righteousness to Abraham is *not* that Abraham is following God’s list of “do”s and “don’t”s (which, for the most part, don’t even exist yet, at this point in the story). All Abraham does is he *looks up at the sky, at all those stars up there in the heavens, and he simply believes that God’s word is worth trusting*. Receiving the gift of justification has absolutely *nothing* to do with our *behavior*, and absolutely *everything* to do with our simple ability and willingness to *trust in God*. *Is God, or is God not, who he says he is?* Will God, or will God not, keep his promises? Abraham looks up at the stars, he hears God say to him, “You’re going to have *that* many descendants,” and Abraham simply ... *believes*. He simply ... *trusts*. He simply *knows*, deep down in the depths of his being, that – despite the fact that he doesn’t yet have a child – God’s word, somehow, is going to come *true*.

That’s what *faith* is. It’s that simple conviction, deep down in our hearts, that *God is worth trusting*. When faith emerges in our life, justification follows; God looks at us and sees not our sin but rather Christ’s righteousness. But Paul says we get something else as well. We become inheritors of a promise. “The promise,” he says, is “guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law” (that is, the Jewish Law), “but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.” Paul, who was a Jew, descended from Abraham by birth, is saying that *anybody* can become a child of Abraham, no matter *what* their lineage. Anyone, of any race or ethnicity, who has a faith like the faith of Abraham, becomes an inheritor of the promises that God made to Abraham. They become part of the family.

Do you see how this works? First comes the faith and trust that God is as good as his word. God responds to that faith and trust by granting us the righteousness of Jesus Christ as a gift, no matter what sins we may ever have committed. Our faith and trust also means that we become part of Abraham’s family, because we have the same kind of faith that he had; and that means that we, too get to inherit all the promises that God bestowed upon Abraham’s descendants. And *that* fact takes us right back to where we started: “in you,” God had said to Abraham, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” This is how all the families of the earth receive God’s blessing; this is how *we* receive that blessing: through simple faith and trust in our God, the Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

To put this another way: justification, redemption, salvation – we do not *earn* these things. We do not *merit* them. We can not *buy* our way into heaven through our deeds here on earth. These things come simply as free gifts to *anybody* who can look up at the heavens ... and simply *believe* God’s word.

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